

Mixed Media Watercolor

Week 1

Watercolor with Acrylic or Gouache

Transparent vs. Opaque

If you work with watercolor, before long you will be familiar with “negative painting” which allows you to create shapes by painting what’s around them rather than the shapes themselves.

You can do this by glazing or layering darker colors or radically different colors, or even more saturated passages of the same color using just transparent watercolor, but the effects are limited by the inability of transparent pigments to completely cover what’s underneath them.

One way to extend the possibilities of negative painting is to use opaque pigments along with your transparent ones. You can do this with either gouache (opaque watercolor), or with acrylic paints.

Start with a Dark, Transparent Underpainting

One simple approach to experiment with involves either painting or pouring saturated transparent watercolor on your paper to create a random wet-in-wet underpainting using mid to dark values. You may or may not have a subject in mind at this stage. Oftentimes, the accidental qualities of the wet-in-wet process will suggest a subject, but if not, you can always create an abstract or non-objective painting.



“SnowFall” by Maxene Masterfield began with transparent colored inks imprinted with plastic wrap. She painted over this underpainting with mostly white acrylic to create the moon and snow banks. Note how the acrylic varies in thickness (and opacity), creating thin “skins” of paint in some places that allow the colored underpainting to show through slightly.



Darlene Wellborn, “Nambe Bowl” began with washes of dark transparent watercolor; over which she painted lighter passages of opaque and semi-opaque acrylic. Notice that she did not completely cover the transparent underpainting in places (like behind the window blinds).

Alternatively, you can start with a very light pencil drawing on your paper, then wet the paper with clean water, and while it’s wet, drop color into the various parts of your drawing according to your subject, letting them spread and merge softly. Timing will be critical here, as you want the colors to spread and blend slightly, but not excessively. Look at the figure in Wellborn’s painting above to see an example of this.

Things to try in your underpainting:

- salt or alcohol added to the wash
- scraping or scratching into the wet paint
- laying plastic wrap or waxed paper into the wash while it’s wet, and leaving them in place until it’s dry
- blowing into the paint with a straw or airbrush

Add a Layer of Opaque Paint

When this transparent watercolor underpainting is dry, you

Mixed Media Watercolor

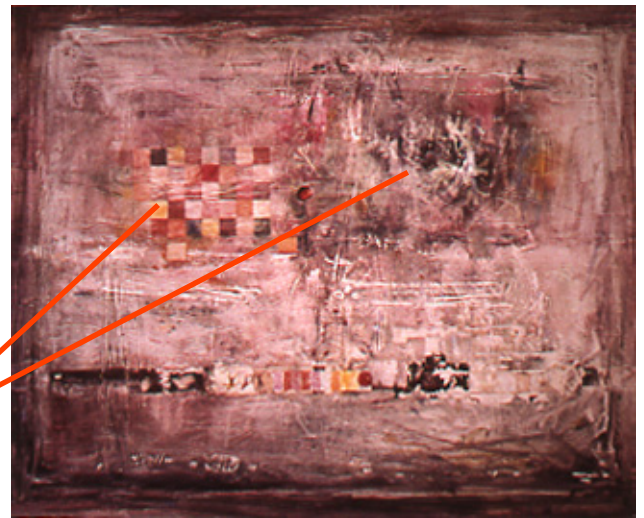
paint over parts of it with opaque or semi-opaque passages of mid-to light values of acrylic (or gouache) to pull out your shapes. You control the opacity of the opaque layer by using more or less water (or acrylic medium if you want to use one with acrylics) to thin the paint. The less thinning you do, the more opaque the paint will be.



As the opaque overpainting begins to dry, you can manipulate it, wiping off areas with paper towel, or scraping through it to expose the dry transparent watercolor beneath, as Max Coyer did in his piece, "Europe After the Rain" (above), or as Camela Grunewaldt did in her piece (right), called "Estrangement". Here she wiped

off acrylic to expose the checkerboard pattern, and did extensive scratching/scraping elsewhere to expose the darker colors beneath.

Timing is critical for wiping and scraping off the acrylic - once it dries, it is waterproof and "scuff proof" and can't easily be removed. Gouache, since it is always resolvable just like transparent watercolor is, tends to be a little more forgiving about timing.



If you plan to do extensive wiping, you will want to put a thin layer of clear acrylic on your transparent watercolor underpainting before you apply the opaque layer. This will keep the underpainting from smearing as you begin to manipulate the opaque top layer. You can use one thin coat of a matt finish clear acrylic spray for this.

Other manipulations of the opaque paint layer to try:

- Use your fingers and/or other "tools" (sticks, combs, buttons, pieces of fabric, etc.) to move the paint around physically and/or "imprint" a thicker passage.
- Use masking tape (the blue low-tack painter's stuff works well) to mask areas of your dry underpainting before painting over it with acrylic. Pull the tape up before the acrylic is completely dry. If you forget to do this, you may need to go along the edges of the tape with an X-acto knife so that when you peel off the tape, it doesn't take the adjoining acrylic layer with it.
- Drop rubbing alcohol into a damp, thinner layer of acrylic for an interesting textural effect.